

Hybrid Threats in Bulgarian Media

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ABSTRACT:

The article presents the results of a recent study aimed at revealing how the term "hybrid threats" (or its synonyms "hybrid attacks," "hybrid war," etc.) is used in Bulgarian public discourse. 688 articles published by 188 media outlets were registered and processed by the method of content analysis. The results show that the term "hybrid threats" is mostly mentioned and not discussed in substance; it is often unclear what exactly the speakers mean by using the term "hybrid threats"; specific narratives are constructed, where the term "hybrid threats" is completely removed from its meaning by definition and loaded with different connotations.

ARTICLE INFO:

RECEIVED: 15 AUG 2019
REVISED: 30 AUG 2019
ONLINE: 22 SEP 2019

KEYWORDS:

hybrid threats, hybrid attacks, hybrid war, Bulgaria,
media, politics



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Introduction

In recent years and especially after the Crimea annexation by Russia in 2014, the concept of "hybrid threats" has been subject to increased academic, political and media interest. The term has been actively used in political documents at the EU and NATO level, as well as in Bulgaria. However, because of its novelty and complexity, it is difficult to effectively communicate this concept to the general public. In this context, my aim was to study how the term (and the whole variety of its synonyms such as "hybrid attacks," "hybrid war," etc.) is represented in the media coverage of Bulgarian public debates:

- Who talks about it, in what context and on which topics?
- What meanings do speakers attribute to the term?
- Are there distinctive and sustainable narratives which include the term in question?

The article begins by discussing the definitions of the concept of “hybrid threats,” in order to derive its key characteristics, based on which the media content is analysed. Then I present the results of the empirical study,¹ in terms of the issues, speakers and meanings attributed to the term “hybrid threats.” I focus especially on the cases when the concept is used with meanings which do not correspond to the derived key characteristics. The article concludes by discussing the outcomes of the study in the light of the current EU’s efforts to address the issue of hybrid threats.

Definitions

As the European Commission notes in the “Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response,”² “definitions of hybrid threats vary and need to remain flexible to respond to their evolving nature.” According to the Commission, “the concept aims to capture the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare.” “Massive disinformation campaigns” are an integral part of this complex phenomenon, using all possible media channels, including the social media.

NATO defines hybrid threats as a “type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space.”³ According to NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, “the term ‘hybrid’ has been used to describe a wide array of measures, means and techniques including, but not limited to: disinformation; cyberattacks; facilitated migration; espionage; manipulation of international law; threats of force (by both irregular armed groups and conventional forces); political subversion; sabotage; terrorism; economic pressure and energy dependency.”

In Bulgaria, the terms “hybrid threats” and “hybrid model of warfare” are defined in the National Cybersecurity Strategy:⁴

Hybrid Threat – Identified intent and ability of a state or non-state entity that can use a hybrid strategy.⁵

Hybrid Warfare Model – used to denote modern conflicts, combining conventional and unconventional actions, cyber-attacks, psychological and economic influence, disinformation campaigns, infiltration of the information environment, creation of panic, funding of deliberately created political subjects, aiming to change the foreign policy line of the targeted opponents and other actions to achieve political and strategic goals.⁶

Based on these definitions, for the purposes of the current study we can draw some key characteristics of the notion of “hybrid threats,” in terms of its use in political debates and their media coverage.

The hybrid threats are multidimensional and include a wide array of measures, so the term could refer to different things in different contexts.

The term could not be reduced to one of its dimensions, without explicitly pointing this dimension. For example, we could not use “hybrid threats” as a synonym of “disinformation campaigns” or “cyber-attacks.”

The term refers to external actors, so “hybrid threats” should not be misattributed to domestic actors or used for labelling domestic “enemies.”

Methods

For the period January 1, 2019 – March 31, 2019, 688 articles were collected using the Europe Media Monitor (EMM):⁷ a freely accessible, fully automatic media analysis system. The source list for Bulgaria (in Bulgarian language) includes 188 media outlets of different type (TV, radio, online) and scope (national and regional). All articles were registered and processed by the method of content analysis.

I started my research based on two main assumptions: First, Insofar as the term “hybrid threats” appears in Bulgarian media at all, it would be due to the international news; As for the political discourse, there would be an inconsistent and often inaccurate or unclear use of the term, but media would be even more frivolous and “creative” in that relation.

The Results

The monthly breakdown of the registered articles clearly shows a peak in the use of the term “hybrid threats” in February 2019. (Figure 1) It is due to the active use of the term in the political discourse.

71% of the registered texts are news articles and only 29 % are views and opinions. As I proved in a previous study,⁸ the so-called analytical genres (commentaries, editorials, opinions, interviews, etc.) on international issues are poorly represented in Bulgarian media (Figure 2).

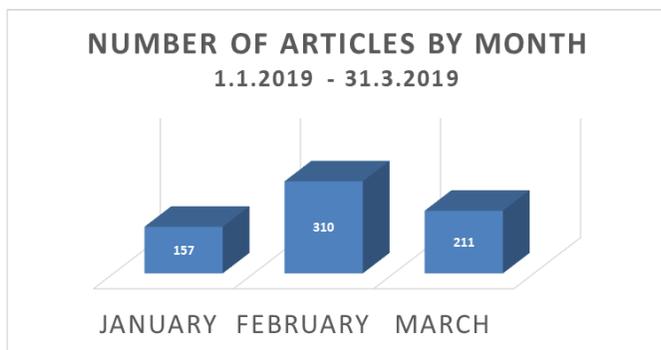


Figure 1: Number of articles by month, 1 January 2019 – 31 March 2019.

Contrary to my expectations, the news articles have predominantly Bulgarian perspective – they refer to Bulgarian events, quote Bulgarian speakers, and show Bulgarian point of view. Thus, my first assumption that the term “hybrid threats” would enter the Bulgarian media space through the international news was disproved (Figure 3).

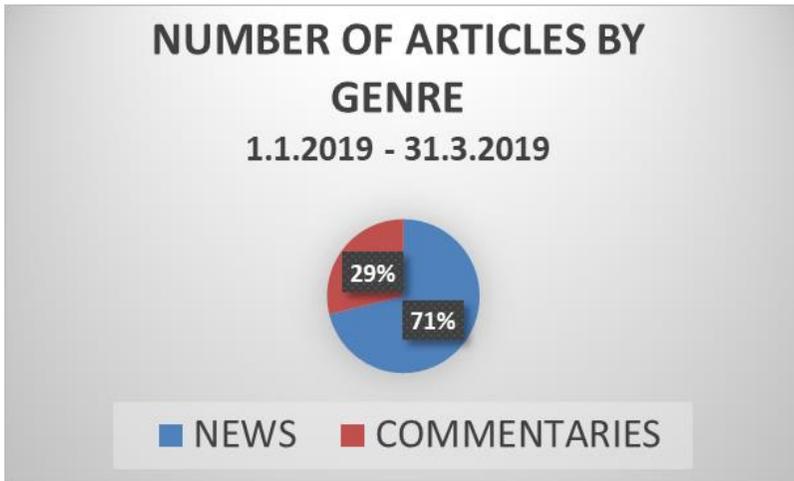


Figure 2: Number of articles by genre.

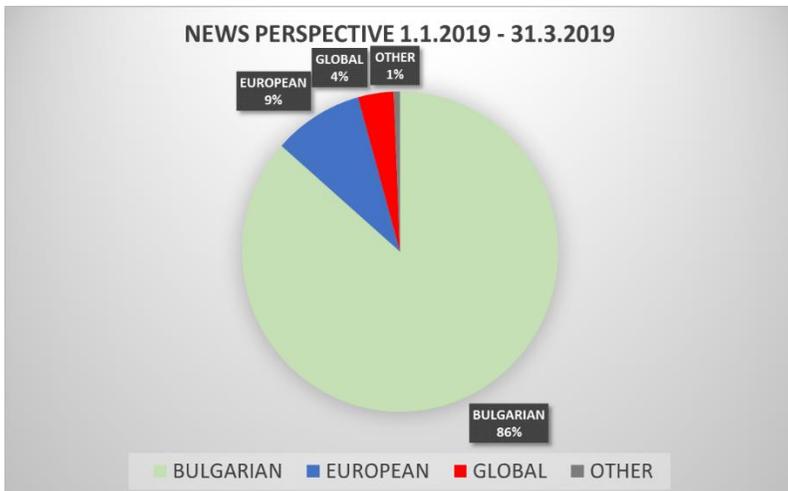


Figure 3: News perspective.

In two-thirds of the news articles, the term “hybrid threats” is simply mentioned without being the main topic or even an accent in the text (Figure 4).

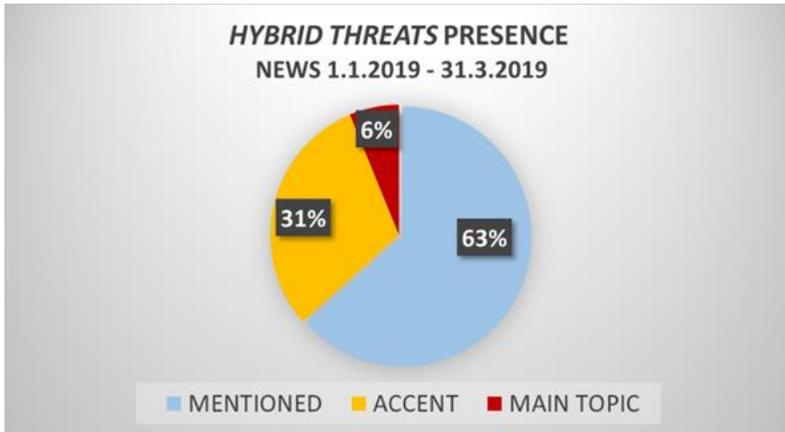


Figure 4: “Hybrid treats” presence in the news.

The distribution by topics confirms the observation that news stories containing the term “hybrid threats” are predominantly of Bulgarian origin. In January, the main topic, which brings the mentions of “hybrid war” up, is the arrest of a Bulgarian businessman, Nikolay Banev. The reason for this increased use of the term is a statement by Prosecutor Ivan Geshev that Nikolay Banev has discussed with “Russian lobbyists” a “hybrid war in his defense, including a media attack on the prosecution.”⁹ It is not clear what Prosecutor Geshev means by “hybrid war,” nor has any journalist ever asked the prosecutor to explain. However, this statement is widely reproduced by the media, and is often referred to as a background in other news on the Banev case in the following months (Figure 5).

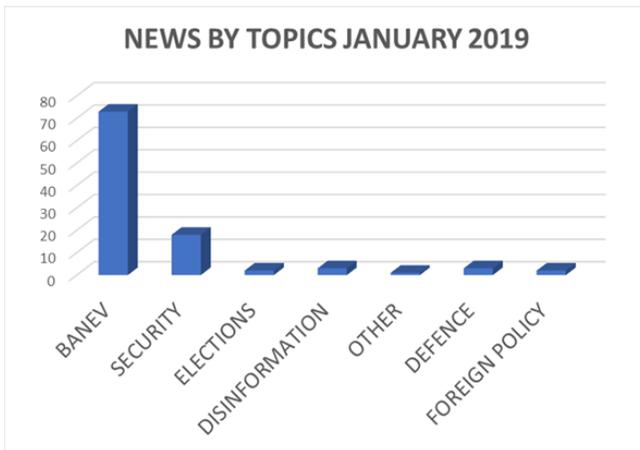


Figure 5: News by topics January 2019.

Another story where the term “hybrid attacks” is mentioned is related to the suspected connection between the ‘Skripal affair’ in the UK and the poisoning

of Bulgarian businessman Emilian Gebrev. The specific speaker, who links the two issues in a joint statement, is then GERB's Deputy Chairman Tsvetan Tsvetanov. In a statement distributed by Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA) and published by a number of media, Tsvetanov says that "in the last 3-4 years Bulgaria, the EU and the United States have been subjected to a hybrid attack by Russia." According to him, "there is information about Russian meddling in the elections in several countries using online and social media, which in each case has led to destabilisation."

We can only speculate what the speaker means by "hybrid attack," but it seems he refers to propaganda, disinformation or trolling activities. It is noteworthy that when other politicians are asked by journalists whether they fear a potential Russian hybrid attack on the Bulgarian elections,¹⁰ the respondents do not use the notion in their answers and do not elaborate on the issue. Thus, the term "hybrid attack" is mainly present in the questions of the journalists, but not in the statements of politicians (Figure 6).

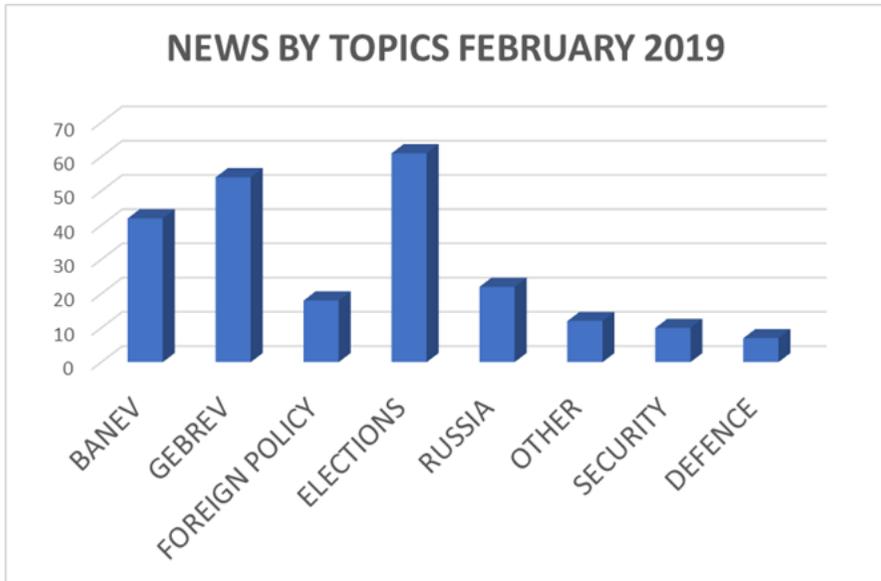


Figure 6: News by topics February 2019.

In March, there is a broader range of topics where the term "hybrid threats" appears in the media coverage. What is more important, there is an increased number of texts where this issue is an accent or even the main topic. The reason for this is not rooted in any real events, nor has the Bulgarian political agenda changed in terms of paying attention to the issue of hybrid threats. The reason is much more pragmatic and banal: two high profile conferences took place in Sofia, one dedicated to the cybersecurity, and the other one - to the 70th anniversary of NATO and the 15th anniversary of the Bulgarian membership in the

Alliance. It is the statements of several prominent politicians at these forums that lead to the increased presence of topics such as “NATO,” “Russia” and “Security (Cybersecurity)” in the media coverage, together with term “hybrid threats” as an accent or a main topic of news stories (Figure 7). Here the term is also used by some speakers as a synonym of cyber threats/attacks.

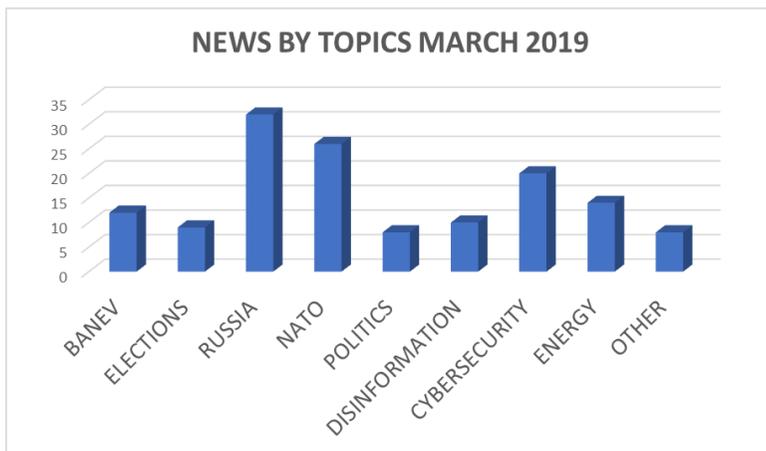


Figure 7: News by topics March 2019.

As regards the speakers, the deputy leader of the ruling party GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov stands out as the most cited speaker in terms of “hybrid threats.” In fact, he is the only representative of the ruling party who comments on (or at least mentions) the subject (Figure 8).

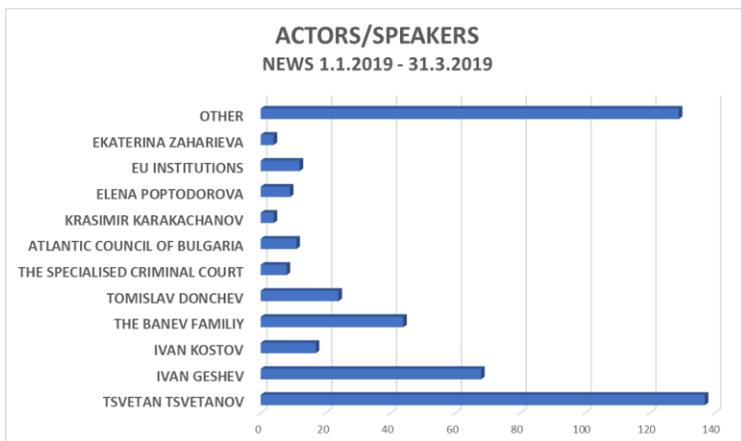


Figure 8: Actors/Speakers.

This is an important observation because it helps us understand the picture revealed by the analysis of the commentary texts. The thematic distribution in

January and February is similar, but in March the tendency to discredit the issue of hybrid threats namely by discrediting Tsvetanov as its main speaker is particularly visible. A media investigation revealed that some prominent politicians (including Tsvetan Tsvetanov) and public servants have purchased luxury homes at knockdown prices. The so called ‘apartmentgate’ forced Tsvetanov to step down as the chairman of the GERB’s parliamentary group.¹¹ In defence, he said that the disclosure was an attack on him and moreover, he saw a “Russian connection” behind it. Some politicians and media supported the version, that Tsvetanov was a victim of his anti-Russia statements,¹² but as a whole the media do not pay much attention to that explanation. In addition, the media interpreted Tsvetanov’s statement that he has expected Russian hybrid attacks on the Bulgarian elections, as kind of reinsurance against a possible loss of GERB. In this way, the topic became a “hostage” to local political intrigues, and if it was mentioned in the media at all, it was in a highly critical or even ironic manner. In her satire piece “The secret diary of Tsvetan Tsvetanov” Polina Paunova writes: “Everything is a hybrid war. ... I have to see how many laws we will adopt, and then abolish just before the election, in order to know to what extend I have to amplify the information about the hybrid threat.”¹³ This is a risk already addressed by the researchers, who note that “governments should be mindful not to inflate the threat level for political ends, either deliberately or inadvertently//” Moreover, “policy-makers should resist the temptation to blame external actors as a convenient way of shifting blame for domestic failings.”¹⁴

In the views and opinions, the notion “hybrid threats” is mostly mentioned and much less often is an accent or main topic of the texts. Moreover, because of the practice of publishing the same texts by many media, the number of the original texts is much lower (Figure 9).

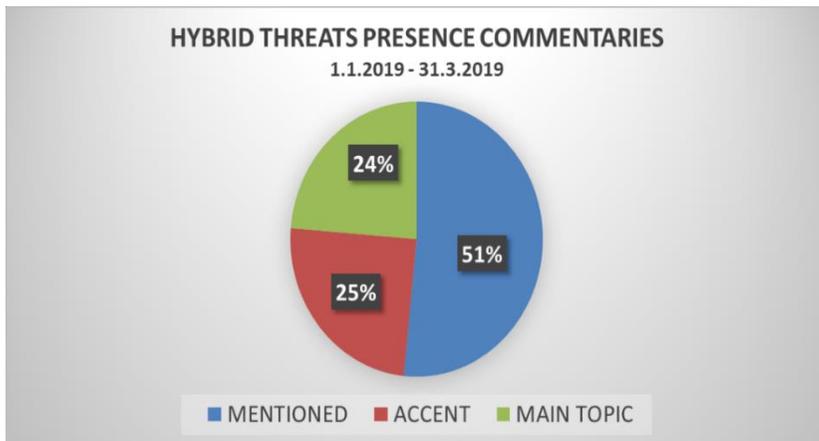


Figure 9: Hybrid threats presence, commentaries.

One of the few articles, where the “hybrid war” is essentially discussed is an analysis by Petar Cholakov for “Deutsche Welle” on the Banev case: “There is already (at least one) political party in the executive branch, which is Russia’s proud fifth column – “Attack.” Is it related to the “hybrid war?” What about the “Belene” NPP project? What is the role of Valentin Zlatev¹⁵ in Bulgarian politics? And in general, given that this government has not taken decisive steps to break our energy dependence on Russia, the news about the planned hybrid war is rather late. And melodramatic.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, these questions are not discussed in Bulgarian public sphere, so the term “hybrid threats” seems abstract and vague to the general public.

However, there are apparent efforts to efforts to downplay the topic and use it for anti-Western propaganda. The newspaper “Trud”¹⁷ puts forward the idea that the hybrid war is actually led by the Anglo-American West, which is trying to keep its global control. It is putting pressure on the EU to “show its teeth” to Russia and China, while at the same time is working to destroy the EU. According to the author, Dr. Iliia Iliev, the ‘Skripal affair’ is an active measure in this scheme and by linking it to the suspected ‘Gebrev affair’ the powers behind this plot are trying to involve Bulgaria in “the big information-psychological operation.”

In the same vein, journalist Peter Volgin writes that “the wails” by a small group of the so called influencers about a Russian hybrid attack on Bulgaria are paid with American money and serve the American interest, which is to keep the EU “a field of hot disputes” and in disagreement with Russia, in order to enable Americans to dominate. “The Bulgarian public must be convinced that the Russians are cynical manipulators of elections and ruthless poisoners of honest businessmen. Bulgarians must be brought to a state where they will see every Russian as an all-powerful hacker, a Borgia-style poisoner or a malicious spy ... The task of the group is to serve the specific political and financial interest of the hegemonic state, to ensure that any cooperation with Russia whether in the energy sector or in any other sphere, would appear to be a crime against humanity.”¹⁸

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev becomes subject to sharp criticism in many articles, due to two international events in February. First, he confronted the government’s (and EU’s) position on the events in Venezuela by saying that Bulgaria should refrain from supporting the proposed European Union position recognising Juan Guaido as interim president of Venezuela. Then he refused to sign the final declaration of the B9¹⁹ meeting in Kosice, claiming that it would “endanger” Bulgaria’s energy interests. In an analysis for “Deutsche Welle”²⁰ political analyst Daniel Smilov writes that Radev is like “drawn by Reshetnikov,”²¹ and Nikola Lalov (“Mediapool”) defines the president himself as a “hybrid threat.”²² The youth organization of the ruling party GERB calls the President Rumen Radev one of the “Bulgarian blades of the Russian hybrid guru general Reshetnikov.”²³

The increased presence of the notion “hybrid threats” as a main topic in March is due to two texts by Peter Cholakov, published by “Deutsche Welle”

and republished in a number of Bulgarian media. The first one is entitled “Bulgaria - the place where Russia is testing its hybrid weapons”²⁴ and it is about “the obscene, straddling position of the Bulgarian political elite on the issue of the increasingly tense relations between Brussels and the Kremlin.” The second one, “Always with NATO, never against Russia?”²⁵ is devoted to the conference on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of NATO and is quoting the words of the President Rosen Plevneliev (2012-2017) who disagreed with the idea that Bulgaria should always be with NATO, but never against Russia. “Let the political elite’s opinion on the topic of hybrid threats be heard. This will be a litmus test. The lamb patriotic skins will quickly fall and the true intentions will shine ... While Europe is debating, taking action and acting, we are once again revealed as a hopeless navel-gazing province,” Cholakov writes.

An analysis of how the concept of “hybrid threats” is presented in recent Bulgarian political documents, conducted by me, showed that it is mostly just mentioned or defined in principle, without referring to specific circumstances or actors. This conclusion is supported by the former Member of Parliament and former member of the Security Services Control Committee Metodi Andreev, who writes: “In all the reports by the services we were considering, the term “hybrid war” against the state was used. However, there was not shown or made clear who the source of this hybrid war was. It was not clear which country was behind this hybrid war.”²⁶ According to Mr. Andreev, the reports did not provide information whether this war was logistically supported by political and business circles. He claims that “the government is hypocritically talking about the hybrid war,” because “now they have summoned up the courage to admit that such a war exists.”

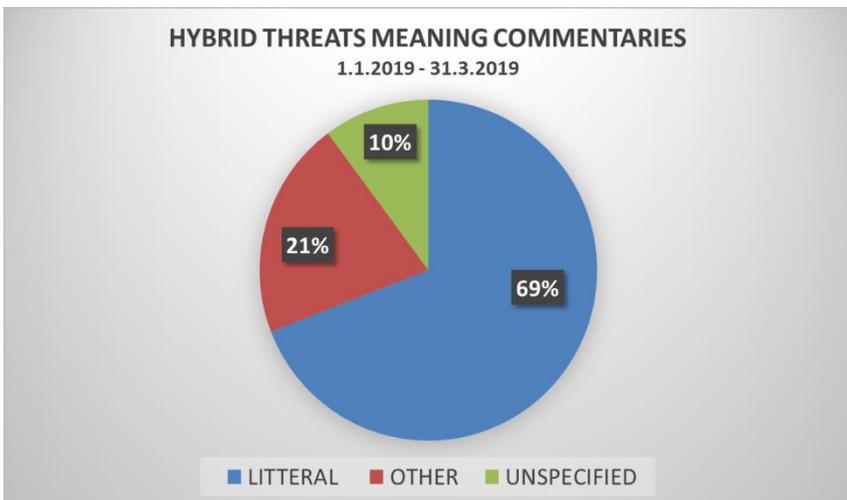


Figure 10: Hybrid threats presence, commentaries.

In the majority of the texts, both news and commentary, the term “hybrid threats” is used in its literal meaning, and as I have already noted, it is only mentioned (Figure 10). However, there is a group of texts where a different meaning is attributed to the notion. After a thorough analysis of the texts in this category, two storylines have emerged.

The first one is developed by a group of media which publish the same texts, as sometimes it is unclear what the original source is. The group includes the newspapers (and their websites) “Monitor,” “Telegraph,” “Trud,” “24 hours,” and the website “Legal world,” but not only. In a series of texts, these media suggest that businessman Emilian Gebrev is pretending to be a victim of a hybrid attack, supported by the media, owned by another businessman, Ivo Prokopiev and financed by the former owner of the collapsed Corporative Commerce Bank (CCB) Tsvetan Vasilev. In an article entitled “To ‘poison’ the deceived depositors in the CCB”²⁷ the unknown author claims that the military factory “Dunarit Group,” whose owner Gebrev claims to be (according to these media - unjustifiably) is part of the banker’s Tsvetan Vasilev scheme and owes 190 million BGN (95 million euro) to the state budget, which Gebrev is not willing to pay and that is the reason for all his “pushing, hybrid attacks, fictitious connections and ‘poisonings’.” It is highlighted that the news about the suspected Gebrev poisoning in 2015 appeared for the first time namely in “Capital Daily” (owned by Prokopiev) and was propagated by “hybrid websites controlled by Tsvetan Vasilev and Ivo Prokopiev.”

In an article eloquently titled “How to legalise a weapons factory with propaganda. The methods of contemporary information wars,”²⁸ published in “24 hours,” the author Violeta Dimitrova argues that the involvement of Bulgaria in the Skripal affair is “a typical example of information war” and “‘the poison lie’ is being disseminated by dozens of conductors of hybrid propaganda on social networks.” The reason for this, says Dimitrova, is “a tremendous amount of money” that Gebrev has acquired through “Dunarit Group,” together with Tsvetan Vasilev, who has already built “the infrastructure currently used for his information war against the state.” This network of “hybrid weapons,” she claims, includes several websites, which disseminate “fake content,” ordered by “the sponsors of hybrid propaganda” Emilian Gebrev and Tsvetan Vassilev. In the same vein, “Trud”²⁹ argues that the whole story about Gebrev’s poisoning and the “Novichok connection” is a cleverly conceived conspiracy by Gebrev and Vassilev, “aiming only to “legalise” a robbery using a hybrid attack against the state.” In its article entitled “Why Emilian Gebrev wanders through TV studios?,”³⁰ “Telegraph” writes about “the hybrid war against all people, who are not convenient for Vasilev and Gebrev,” including Delyan Peevsky MP, who is the publisher of the “Telegraph” and “Monitor” (and also a former partner of Vasilev). Gebrev’s “media circus,” the text goes, is aimed at forcing the state to give him for free “a factory worth 300 million leva” by using “manipulations and hybrid attacks.”

Several articles, published by the media in the same group, are devoted to the judicial system. There we could read that the claim about “the bad prosecution” is “hybrid propaganda against the state prosecution,”³¹ the Citizens’ Initiative “Justice for Everyone” is a “hybrid group,”³² and a citizen gathering in support of the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation (SCC) Lozan Panov is a “hybrid protest.”³³

Thus, the term “hybrid threats” is completely removed from its meaning by definition and loaded with different connotations, related to obscure conflicts between domestic political and business opponents. However, there is no element of external threats to the national security and no foreign actors are involved in these “hybrid scenarios,” created by these media.

Through the second storyline the meaning of the term “hybrid threats” has also been profoundly changed, but in an entirely different way. In March, Bulgarian media circulated the news that brochures with ‘gay content’ have been distributed in some schools in the country. On this occasion, Sliven’s Metropolitan bishop published a statement, which was cited by some media. According to the statement, the church is concerned “about the moral standards of Orthodox Christians and the Orthodox Christian family” and “cannot remain indifferent and silent to this anti-moral hybrid aggression against children.”³⁴

In the same vein, the newspaper “24 Chasa” published an article entitled “Hybrid War! A European questionnaire on the quality at school suddenly turned into a ‘gender attack on the education’.”³⁵ The story broke out in the media when an anonymous reader wrote to “Duma,” the official newspaper of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, claiming that the questionnaire had a third option for ‘gender,’ other than ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ Bulgarian socialists used the story to boost again their campaign against “the third gender.”

Viktor Ivanov (“24 Chasa”) explains how the issues of “the third gender” and “genderism” is used with propaganda purposes in Bulgarian public debates.³⁶ He argues that the real objective of the “hybrid war” is to create a total societal confusion and to convince us that “Europe is becoming the evil willing to harm Bulgaria.” Here the author uses the term “hybrid war” as a synonym of propaganda and disinformation. In fact, this is the meaning that most of the speakers have in mind while talking about “hybrid threats,” my analysis shows. In some other cases, such as the claims about potential hybrid attacks on the elections, the meaning is rather close to that of “cyber attacks.” The analysis proved my assumption that there would be an inconsistent and often inaccurate or unclear use of the term in the political discourse, but media would be even more frivolous and “creative” in that relation.

Conclusions

Based on the above presented results, the following conclusions could be drawn: In Bulgarian media, the term “hybrid threats” is mostly mentioned and not discussed in substance; Views and opinions on the issue of hybrid threats are rarely published; The presence of the term “hybrid threats” in the media is due to domestic stories and other factors, related to specific political, business

or media agendas; In political claims, it is often unclear what exactly the speaker means by using the term “hybrid threats.” It could be suggested, based on this analysis, that in most cases the term is used as synonym of “propaganda” or “disinformation.”

In the media discourse, specific narratives are constructed, where the term “hybrid threats” is completely removed from its meaning by definition and loaded with different connotations. One of these narratives is related to some obscure conflicts between domestic political and business opponents. The second one links the concept of “hybridity” to the gender ideology, thus attributing to the notion the meaning of something immoral, unclean, non-Christian. This approach could be defined as manipulative and destructive, because it prevents the public from understanding the real meaning of the term “hybrid threats” and the significance of the issue. However, we cannot say based only on these results, whether discrediting the term was the primary goal of the creators of these narratives or they pursued some more important goals and the term has become only “collateral damage.”

From the point of view of the EU’s efforts to deal with hybrid threats, seen as destructive to the functioning of our democratic societies, the presented results raise the question of how these efforts could be effective in Bulgaria, given that our society has already been presented with an incorrect and in essence, a disinformed idea of what hybrid threats are.

If I have to make suggestions on how to raise the awareness of the concept of “hybrid threats” and put the issue into the media agenda (and hence, the public agenda), I would say that efforts must be made by the politicians in the first place. Bulgarian media is willing to give politicians ample opportunity to express themselves, including defining the agenda, so that politicians can use this to increase the visibility of the topic and to clarify the concept. However, this would require to get into the specifics because we cannot explain what hybrid threats are without naming their specific source and their specific manifestations.

Journalists, for their part, could link the concept of hybrid threats to other topics on the current agenda to show the specific manifestations of these threats. For example, the topic of “Belene” NPP construction, the Russian influence in Bulgarian energy sector and Bulgaria’s energy dependence on Russia in general. This will give the public the opportunity to realise that the hybrid threats are not some kind of propaganda trick, but a real danger to the independent democratic societies.

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